

The Role of Technology in the Art of Nam June Paik: Paik's Videotapes  
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Paik is the preeminent pioneer in the field of video art, both because he was one of the earliest artists to work with the medium, (and as such has probably worked with it the longest), and because he has, since the very beginning of his video career, foreseen the ramifications of his medium and conveyed these ideas to both his fellow artists and public alike. In terms of video art, specifically the videotapes designed for the television, Paik is a pioneer in several respects. He was the first artist to own and create art with a video camera and the first to build a video synthesizer which he made available to the public. By building the synthesizer, Paik was the first artist to bring the means of television production into his own hands. The Paik/Abe Synthesizer made possible the creation of colors, images and video effects which can be manipulated and changed in “real” time (as the images recorded by the camera take place or are created). The electronically produced and enhanced images are unattainable in any other medium and were unavailable to video artists before the invention of the synthesizer.

In 1959 when Paik began working with television, the video recorder was used exclusively by the commercial industry; its exorbitant cost made it inaccessible to others. This is why Paik began working with the television set itself by experimenting with the circuitry and other inherent properties of the set to produce new visual imagery electronically. Before the portable video recorder, Paik had no way to record his video art nor could he use external input from the video camera as the source of his imagery. When he started experimenting with television the cost of a video recorder was a roughly one half million dollars; because of this he tried unsuccessfully to build his own video recorder with the aid of Shuya Abe in 1964.

Shortly after his arrival in the United States in 1964, circumstances changed. In October 1965 he purchased the first Sony portable video recorder available in the United States at the Liberty Music Shop on Madison Avenue, New York. He was able to procure this (somewhat modestly priced) camera, recorder, and monitor with money from a John D. Rockefeller III grant. Because of this prestigious grant, Paik and his professional sponsors managed to convince the Liberty Shop that his purchase should be given priority, allowing him to “snatch” up the camera. That afternoon, on his way downtown to the weekly Fluxus performance night at the Cafe a Go-Go, Paik was held up in traffic; as it turned out, it was Pope Paul VI's motorcade on its way to Saint Patrick's Cathedral. Paik taped the motorcade and that evening, amidst a flurry of proclamations, (the handbills had been printed ahead of time for Paik's “video premiere”), he announced the advent of video art, “television's first popular revolt”, and hailed the new cathode-ray canvas. (1)

Paik's first videotapes and broadcast pieces were an extension of his earlier efforts to reveal the intrinsic communication properties of television and to enlist audience participation. They were also an extension of his prepared televisions. A 1966 videotape, Johnny Carson vs. Charlotte Moorman, demonstrated the new presence of the artist in the previously self-contained realm of broadcast television. Taped off the air, the piece is a series of excerpts from a program in which Johnny Carson interviewed Moorman concerning the activities of the avant-garde. Paik placed a live-wire (which conducted current) across the recorded tape reel which resulted in erasures where the electrically active wire touched the tape-- in ever increasing intervals towards the end of the reel. The purpose of this piece was to force the viewer to recognize the presence of the artist. (2) By disrupting the tape, he made evident the concept of “reel” versus “real” time. Paik tampered with the program, taped by the video recorder, in much the same way as he had previously tampered with the television set.

Soon after he began working with television, Paik envisioned the creation of a video synthesizer, a visual equivalent to audio synthesizers such as the Moog synthesizer. (The combination of electronic sound and

visuals together would make-up his “electronic opera.”) While artist-in-resident at WGBH, the necessity of such a device became acutely clear to Paik, who was frustrated by the production means of the large television studio.

Big TV studio always scares me. Many layers of “Machine Time” parallely running, engulfs my identity. It always brings me the anxiety of Norbert Wiener, seeing the delicate yet formidable dichotomy of Human Time and Machine Time .... In the heated atmosphere of TVcontrol room, I yearn for the solitude of a Franz Schubert, humming a new song in the unheated attics in Vienna .... (7)

Paik managed to convince the station to assist him in the creation of this synthesizer, a “five-year dream,” (“ironically a huge Machine (WGBH Boston) helped me to create my anti-machine machine”) and enlisted the aid of Shuya Abe. (8) The Paik/Abe synthesizer enabled Paik to put all the visual elements involved in the distorted televisions into a single “real-time piano” controlled by the twirl of a dial.

Paik created the synthesizer so artists could have access to the processes which were previously available only at large production studios. In addition, he imagined that the video synthesizer could be made available to individuals to use in their own home as a participation-creation instrument used “like watercolor sets [are used] today.” (9) Paik immediately shared his new electronic palette with the public (setting him apart from other artists who created video synthesizers). In 1970, WGBH produced Paik's Video Commune. A four hour live broadcast, Video Commune (again a reference to the electronic global village) used the entire collection of Beatles music as its sound track. During the course of the program, Paik invited people off the street to come into the studio and manipulate the synthesizer to create “not cybernated art... but art for cybernated life.” (9) The visual “pyrotechnics” blew out a transmitter. (10) In 1971, Paik installed the synthesizer in the Galeria Bonino, New York so that gallery visitors could “ham” in front of the camera and manipulate the images; in this way the audience became both the artist and content of the work. To increase accessiblity to this new instrument, Paik published the technical diagrams for it and agreed to assist in the creation of several duplicate models for WNET-TV, New York, the California Institute of the Arts, and two for the Experimental Television Center in Binghamton, New York.

Paik built the Video Synthesizer because he felt the necessity of a direct, inexpensive means to control and manipulate the tremendous range of 'possibilities in television-- images, shapes, and colors, which had not yet been explored. In poetic fashion, Paik imagined that

\*\*\*the versatile color TV synthesizer will enable us to shape the TV canvas

as precisely	as Leonardo
as freely	as Picasso
as colorfully	as Renoir
as profoundly	as Mondrian
as violently	as Pollack and
as lyrically	as Jasper Johns (12)

A generation of video artists explored the capabilities and effects of Paik's synthesizer which created beautiful, intensely colorful abstracted images and effects. (13) The Paik/Abe synthesizer is, in fact, an electronic palette of luminous color (because light is transmitted through the set) and controlled distortion. Paik believed video was the ultimate area in which visual artists could work. Very aware of history and art history, he viewed the vast artistic capabilities of synthesized video as expanding the static world of painting by injecting into it the element of time. Time, Paik believed, was the characteristic which made video (as a visual art) exceptional. He stated,

\*\*\*From Monet to Joseph Kosuth, people tried everything. After that, in painting's world. everything was done. You can only do so much within the limited styles of painting from realistic to abstract to conceptual art. One

way to move painting forward was to inject the element of time. (14)

Again, while a lack of “concrete” content is often perceived in Paik's abstract video collages, the content is the reflection of the nature of the medium itself and especially its temporal structure. In this regard Paik's exploration of time is parallel to a painter's exploration of the inherent qualities of painting-- surface, color, and texture.

Paik understood that what makes the video image so engaging is the emitted light. The video synthesizer allowed artists to control a new range of brilliant color, which Paik believed was one of video's greatest assets. He has remarked that when he began working with the video medium, he found it “vastly superior” to that of painting. “The color is much more vivid,” observed Paik, “and the programming much easier. The Paik/Abe synthesizer uses imagery from the outside world extensively. Images are fed from a battery of cameras into a console which distorts and colorizes the imagery. As many as seven different black and white cameras can serve as the source and each camera is assigned one of the seven colors of the rainbow. The composite result is derived by mixing together these colorized images. Any quantity of color could be added to the (black and white images) fed into the console. In addition to manipulating the imagery supplied by the cameras (stretching it, folding it, reversing it) the synthesizer can control images produced by a range of electronic “feedback” (produced, as in audio feedback, when the camera, or mike is placed so close to the recorder, it forms a circuit with itself) which creates images of abstracted shadows and linear patterns.

“The Paik/Abe synthesizer,” says video artist Douglas Davis, “is expressionistic in every sense of the word.” (16) The highly saturated and luminous color produced by the synthesizer is very tactile, as light is projected from the monitor and “caresses the viewer.” (17) Surprised by the synthesizer's capabilities Paik remarked, “I can't believe my eyes sometimes when I am looking at the color.” (18) When the photographer Cartier-Bresson first saw the synthesizer demonstrated in Colorado, he professed that it “created color unlike any he had ever seen before in art or nature.” (19) This “vibrant nervous color” is quite unique to video. (20)

1 David Ross, “Nam June Paik's Videotapes,” John Hanhardt. Nam June Paik. NY: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1973. p. 102. “To predict video would replace painting was a shocking thing to say in 1965,” said Paik. “Actually at that time I really thought video would replace the canvas because when I worked in the medium it was vastly superior. The color is much more vivid and programming easier[!]” Nancy Miller, The Color of Time: Video Sculpture by Nam June Paik (Waltham, MA: Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, 1984) n. pag.

2 Ross 103.

7. Nam June Paik, “Video Synthesizer Plus,” Radical Software 2 (1970) 25.

8. Paik 25. The synthesizer was built at the Experimental Television Center in Binghamton, New York. i

9. Douglas Davis, Art and the Future (NY; EP Dutton, 1973), p152.

10. Judson Rosebush (ed.) Videa ‘n’ Videology, 1973.

11. Johnathan Price Video Visions: A Medium Discovers Itself. NY: New American Library, 1972 114.

12. Nam June Paik, “Versatile Color TV Synthesizer,” Rosebush n. pag.

13. Hermine Freed remarks, “Admitting the brilliance of synthetic video... too many Paik followers have produced video tapes that are made by turning knobs and pushing levers...” Hermine Freed, “Nam June Paik Retrospective”, Art Journal, Fall 1982. 249.

14 Nancy Miller, The Color of Time: Video Sculpture by Nam June Paik (Waltham, MA: Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, 1984).

14 Miller n. pag.

16 Douglas Davis, “Video Obscura,” Artforum April 1972: 71.

17 Bruce Kurtz, “Video is Being Invented,” Arts Magazine Dec.-Jan. 1973: 38.

18 Paik quoted in Davis 152.

19 Cartier-Bresson quoted in Kurtz 38.

20. Gene Youngblood, Expanded Cinema (NY: EP Dutton, 1970) 65.